

HUNTING IS HUMANE

1. I think a reasoned defense of hunting, an activity I enjoy very much, would be as difficult to compose as a reasoned defense of drinking whiskey or going to the theater. All three are things men do for pleasure. All three come under attack at times from the various kinds of puritans with whom the culture of this country is traditionally afflicted. The puritans brought us prohibition not long ago. They kept theater out when we were colonies (and their influence is still felt in the mindless censoring of today's forms of popular theater, television and the movies). They are pressing now, and sometimes achieving, various laws designed to restrict hunting--laws which have nothing to do with game protection or safety; such laws are in the bleak category of moral legislation.

2. Now there is no honest defense of any pleasure except to say, I do it because I enjoy it. When criticized, we are likely to take peripheral benefits (exercise, identification with tradition, relaxing of tensions) and try to make them stand up as central justification. This seems to me a mistake. All we ought really to say to those spoilers who would suppress pleasures they do not share is this: Disapprove of me as you will, but to try to give your disapproval the force of law is a crime against freedom.

3. Beyond this, in the particular matter of hunting, I can distinguish three kinds of attacker, and each deserves a different answer. There are the moralists, who must be answered with an invitation to examine themselves. There are the sentimentalists, who must be answered with straightforward information. The third are simply the politicians, who may be answered with contempt. Let us take them in reverse order.

4. The politicians. I do not mean to restrict the term to those who seek office; any men whose goal is influence, and whose means of seeking it are cynical, are politicians in the bad, broad sense. Often politicians are men of some intelligence and energy. There were many of them working for prohibition; the ladies with hatchets could never have put it over without them. They provide the officer corps for crusades, whether to burn books or witches. They are tough men; their inability to see the other sides of issues is self-willed rather than actual; they attempt to lead by organizing the sentimentality of the uninformed, and I shall be done with them very quickly. For if their abilities make them the most effective opponents, to answer them is no more than a matter of exposure.

5. The example which comes most readily to mind does happen to be a politician in the narrow sense, a legislator who announced that his opposition to a dove-hunting bill was based on the determination to forestall extinction. I know this man to be familiar with the methods of modern game management. As will, I believe, become clear, depletion--let alone extinction--of any species by hunting is quite impossible under the controls practiced today in all 50 of our states (and, as regards migratory birds, under federal supervision as well). In fact, and very strict fact, the result of legalizing hunting for a species is to build it up, and many nongame species along with it. The prohibition of dove hunting in certain states is an absolutely clear example of legislation which has no other purpose than to tell a hunter what his conscience should permit. This legislator was choosing to talk nonsense for its supposed political appeal; there are a good many like him. Their crime against freedom is the worst, because it does not even spring from genuine moral conviction.

6. The sentimentalists. These are people whose tenderness of heart and failure of comprehension make the decent hunter feel that the best he can do is keep his views to himself as, were legislation of morals not involved, I would. To let them go their way deploring me, while I go mine avoiding them, seems the most

comfortable way for all parties. But if they are to be used as foot soldiers in a crusade against hunting, then I had better at least make a try at presenting to the more open-minded a summary of the facts.

7. Hunters, like nature, are indifferent to the lives of individual creatures, but infinitely solicitous of the survival and multiplication of species. (There has been some evolution here, of course, from the market hunters and blood sports of the 19th century.) Modern hunters spend millions of dollars annually in state license fees, special federal taxes and contributions to private organizations, to preserve and increase game. Obviously and admittedly our motives are selfish. We want those creatures to be there to hunt during the short seasons when hunting is permitted. But what must be understood is the nature of the permission sought and granted; it is not permission to deplete a game species, only to harvest its surplus. Further, the surplus we harvest is always set well under the vast numbers of animals which--even were hunting not permitted--will perish annually anyway as a result of predation, attrition and disease. To return to mourning doves for a moment, as a good example: This species is classified as game by international treaty, by tradition and by law which permits hunting it in 31 of the 50 states. Doves are extremely common, far more so in the United States than any other upland game bird, and extremely prolific; in Iowa, for example--a non-dove-hunting state--they are more numerous than robins or meadowlarks. Now, studies show that of all the doves hatched in a given year, 70 percent will not reach the age of one. They will starve, die accidentally, get sick or fall to owls, hawks and foxes. Nevertheless, in such a state as Iowa the total population will remain stable.

8. In states where doves are hunted, on the other hand, the birds actually shot by hunters will simply be part of the 70 percent fatality (a small part--four percent, for example, in California). This is to say, hunters will be permitted to harvest part of a surplus which would be taken otherwise by other means. Moreover, the total dove population in the hunting states from year to year will increase. This is due to a number of factors, the most important being that hunters' license fees are spent in part to expand and create the kind of habitat in which doves can nest, hatch and flourish. In addition, the time when hunting is permitted coincides with the population peak; flocks are huge, primary ranges crowded. The competition for food and cover among the birds is intense and damaging, and the crowding promotes disease. At the moment the first gun sounds on opening day these big flocks begin to scatter, to thin out into secondary ranges for better protection. A few individuals fall; species prosper.

9. Through their support of federal, state and private conservation agencies, hunters have paid the bills for establishing pheasants, for preserving waterfowl breeding grounds and refuges, and for the salaries of the men who protect the game from the excesses of the greedy. Even more dramatically, the hunter's self-interest has, in our lifetime, brought back species from the edge of extinction. The pronghorn antelope was, not long ago, a vanishing species. This had nothing to do with hunting. The pronghorns were the victims of so-called progress: clearing, plowing, building, overgrazing, drainage. Hunters' money--blood money, if you like--bought the preserves, paid the specialists, financed the experiments which have restored the pronghorn to the point where nature lovers (which includes most hunters) may see these animals from their cars on the way to our western parks. And each year a small surplus of them may be shot for sport. The wild turkey, reestablished now in many states, has benefited from hunters' interest in much the same way.

10. Thus, and with dozens more such examples, it may be shown that an attack on hunting cannot be realistically based on the wish to protect game species. Inasmuch as it is based on a desire to protect the individual game creature from

cruelty and death, the hunter's immemorial reply is simply that he is no more cruel than nature, and far less wasteful.

11. The moralists. If politicians are the generals in crusades, and sentimentalists the foot soldiers, then moralists are the grand strategists and ideologists, the men who provide ideas and define goals. Their sincerity cannot be placed in question, nor can we say that they are not entitled to argue their opinions so persuasively, if they can, as to make us forswear the pleasures of hunting out of sheer guilt.

12. The best of them are those whose opposition to killing for sport is based on a moral code of total reverence for life in all its forms, who eat no meat, swat no mosquitoes and will not poison other bugs to improve the quality of the fruits and vegetables on which they subsist. For such men I have a good deal of respect, a certain reverence even, but I do not share their code. And I do not wish it imposed on me (or you) by law.

13. There are very few such men, of course. The great majority of those who urge that I feel guilt for the game I kill live in somewhat more transparent houses. They see a moral difference of some kind between the unnatural rearing and drab, bloody slaughter of meat and fowl commercially, and the system of game management which raises crops of wild birds and animals to be harvested by men who find challenge and excitement, health and pleasure, in trying it. With gentle smiles, these part-way moralists pull on their gardening gloves and dust the roses to kill the merry, high-hopping flea beetle. Gaily they cast the lure which will attract and hook the exuberantly innocent bass. Craftily they place the trap which will drive sharp prongs through the furry back of the comically shortsighted mole. And for lunch it's cutlets or chops, from brown-eyed calves or woolly lambs.

14. No, if you are not a sage who can see that the housefly, with its transparent wings and iridescent body, is too beautiful to kill, I cannot take seriously the presumption that my morals as a hunter are worse than yours as a gardener, or fisherman, or sanitary housekeeper who cooks good chicken. Growing, catching--even cleaning and cooking--are instinctive things; so, for men of a certain temperament, is hunting.

15. There is enough in such men, I suppose, of the primitive so that to hunt and kill a creature under difficult conditions is profoundly satisfying. The two parts of the sequence must occur together, or there is no satisfaction. Killing, and this is generally misunderstood, is no pleasure at all if the challenge of hunting does not accompany it. I do not relish, for example, cutting the heads off chickens, as I must from time to time, nor do I like trapping mice. Against such simple, necessary and quite dreary killing, let me describe a brief hunt I made yesterday.

16. It was a windy afternoon, two degrees above zero and with eight inches of snow covering the ground. It seems almost unimaginable, in a way, that I wanted to go out, and perhaps that I did very much want to is demonstration enough of the power hunting has to excite me. As I warmed the car, I thought of a certain steep hill nearby, along the bottom of which runs a thick growth of giant ragweed, wild plum, blackberry bushes and small trees--good winter cover. I thought pheasants ought to be in there.

17. With my big old bird dog, who is called Moon, and a springer puppy I had run for the first time last fall, I hunted the long thicket; there were pheasant tracks all through it, but no birds. A few tracks led, illogically, up the steepest part of the hill into the wind, and Moon indicated that they were fresh. Up the hill,

sliding and scrambling, the pup and I went after him; out of breath, feeling the cold, I was finally running to keep up, as Moon went across the top and into a wooded draw on the far side. And suddenly birds went up, near the dog and out of range for me: four hens, then a cock, then another cock. The second cock flew toward me, saw me, turned and swept away down the draw. I might have shot if I'd been quick enough, but I wasn't.

18. Old Moon came bounding back on a fresh scene, and I went after him up another steep bank toward a second and smaller draw. Just at the edge Moon pointed. I tried to be both quick and careful, and was almost to the dog when the bird flew straight into the sun. At first, starting to lower the gun, I took it for a hen. Then it turned slightly, I saw a glint of color on its neck, it gave a confirming cackle, and I swung and shot all in one movement. And the cock fell. It was the kind of snap shot I've been missing recently, and I was delighted.

19. The bird hit the ground dead, slid along the snow down the steep side of the draw; old Moon plunged down that way and got him and started to climb back to me, the little springer following both ways, wagging his tail. And just at this moment, from close to where they had retrieved the bird (and where I might easily have been if I'd been alert) another cock flew up. I fired. I missed. But I had my bird, I was warm with pleasure, and the dogs were ecstatically proud of themselves.

20. Today we hunted another hour and raised no birds at all, but I am as pleased, as cleansed, as brightened by my time outdoors in the cold weather as I was yesterday when I saw several and got one. The dogs feel pretty good, too. And I find myself willing to acknowledge that my pleasure in hunting differs very little from theirs: It is an exercise of instinct, training and, to some extent, physical endowment, and we like it.

21. Not all dogs are fit to hunt, of course, nor, in the same way, are all men gratified by it. Nor, for those of us who share this dog's pleasure of hunting (if you will), do I ask special tolerance or understanding. We are as we are, and if we seem to you to act immorally, it is certainly your right to feel so. But I say most seriously that you exceed your rights when you urge that laws be made in the shape of your conscience to block pleasures permitted by mine. When you prevail, you commit a crime against freedom, and that is the greatest immorality.

--Vance Bourjaily

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